



In 2011, the now sunsetted Minnesota Early Learning Foundation (MELF) made a number of recommendations for improving early education in Minnesota. Their recommendations featured the creation of a targeted, flexible, multi-year Early Learning Scholarship program paired with the Parent Aware Quality Rating and Improvement System. This proven approach is sometimes referred to around the nation as the “Minnesota Model” for early learning.

In 2012, a successor organization – Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) – was formed with a mission focused on promotion and evaluation. Late in 2016 the evaluation and marketing portions of the PASR mission were sunsetted, and Close Gaps by 5 was launched to bring the “Minnesota Model” to full scale.

This report documents progress made during 2017 enacting and implementing the MELF recommended reforms.

Public Sector To-Do List

MELF Blueprint Recommendations	2017 Progress Report	Minnesota's Grade, So Far
OVERALL GRADE		C+ Trending Positive 
<p>✓ EXPAND PARENT AWARE STATEWIDE. Make the Parent Aware Ratings available to all Minnesota parents, providers and children within three years.</p>	<p>The Parent Aware Ratings became available to early care and education programs statewide in January of 2015. Currently, nearly 2,700 providers are rated and more are signing up every week.</p> <p>The 2016 Legislature failed to approve full funding for the Parent Aware system, but did make a small, initial state investment of \$1.75M per year.</p> <p>In 2017, the Dayton Administration's Dept. of Human Services (DHS) dedicated \$8.5M per year in federal funding to continue and expand Parent Aware.</p>	<p>A- Trending Positive </p>
<p>✓ KEEP PARENT AWARE RATINGS SIMPLE. Make Parent Aware simple and easily accessible for parents.</p>	<p>A PASR-funded website, ParentAware.org, was developed in partnership with DHS and launched in 2014. The site is more simple, user-friendly and comprehensive than any previous iteration, and has been very successful.</p> <p>In 2017, a number of smaller improvements were made, and the site remains heavily used by Minnesota parents. However, since PASR-funded ads no longer exist following PASR's sunset in 2016, and that work has not yet been restarted, there are no longer ads explaining the Ratings and encouraging their use. This impacts Ratings accessibility, particularly with new parents.</p>	<p>B Trending Negative </p>
<p>✓ MAKE QUALITY IMPROVEMENT SIMPLE. Make the quality improvement system simple and easily accessible for providers.</p>	<p>Since 2012, thanks in large part to federal Race to the Top grant funding, providers have been receiving Parent Aware supports like quality improvement grants, coaching and training. In mid-2016 that federal grant ran out.</p> <p>In 2016 the Legislature failed to approve full funding for Parent Aware, but made a small, initial state investment, which was maintained in 2017. In 2017, DHS used available federal funding to, among other things, increase available coaching support and more than double available quality improvement grants.</p>	<p>A- Trending Positive </p>

Public Sector To-Do List

MELF Blueprint Recommendations	2017 Progress Report	Minnesota's Grade, So Far
<p>✓ LINK RATINGS AND SCHOLARSHIPS. Link the new scholarships to the Parent Aware Ratings.</p>	<p>State-funded scholarships can only be used with early care and education providers who can prove, through the Parent Aware Ratings, that they are using the best practices for preparing children for kindergarten.</p> <p>(While this MELF recommendation was about Scholarships, and not Universal Pre-kindergarten (UPK) or other state funding streams, it is important to note that if policy changes are made that result in fewer publicly funded programs participating in the Rating system we will speak out.)</p>	<p>A+</p>
<p>✓ MAKE SCHOLARSHIPS EASY TO USE. Make the new scholarships simple and accessible for parents and providers.</p>	<p>The original MELF Scholarships were not capped, but the Minnesota Dept. of Education (MDE) administratively capped Early Learning Scholarships, which makes them much less flexible than they were in the pilot. The per scholarship cap was increased by MDE in 2015, but not in 2016 or 2017. The current \$7,500 cap creates three big problems: 1) The cap remains too low to move some of Minnesota's most vulnerable low-income children off of waiting lists. 2) Additionally, an artificially low cap forces many parents to navigate a confusing group of government programs, a multi-program approach which is needlessly bureaucratic and disempowering for parents. 3) It limits the number of parents working full-time who can use full-time programs to improve child outcomes and limit parents' expenses and hassles.</p> <p>Beyond the problem with low caps, nearly half of the Scholarships – Pathway II Scholarships – are being administered by MDE in a way that doesn't give parents the level of choice, empowerment and portability that was available to parents with MELF-piloted scholarships. In 2017, funding for MDE's inflexible Pathway II Scholarships was capped by the Legislature, and \$20M in additional funding was all dedicated to the flexible Pathway I Scholarships.</p>	<p>C- Trending Positive</p> 
<p>✓ IMPROVE RATINGS STANDARDS. Strengthen Parent Aware Ratings standards whenever research supports stronger standards.</p>	<p>PASR and partner Greater Twin Cities United Way invested over a million dollars in an independent, third party evaluation of the Ratings to identify ways to improve them. Following that evaluation, standards were strengthened in 2017. Examples of improvements include: awarding points for use of approved child assessment tools; consideration of family engagement practices and other practices related to cultural competency; and increased incentives for teachers to continue their education.</p>	<p>A</p>
<p>✓ REFORM TRADITIONAL CHILD CARE PROGRAMS. Make the current government child care programs much more streamlined (for parents and providers), accountable and focused on school readiness.</p>	<p>In 2013, a Child Care Assistance Program (CCAP) reimbursement rate bonus for 3- and 4-Star programs was passed. However, in 2014 a CCAP reform plan that would require CCAP recipients to have Ratings by 2018, and was supported by both the Dayton Administration and a bipartisan group of legislators, fizzled in the Legislature. In the 2015, 2016 and 2017 legislative sessions, there has been no additional progress towards making the enormous CCAP investments more accountable for early education quality. As a result, too many low-income Minnesota children remain in programs that are not using kindergarten readiness best practices.</p> <p>In 2017, legislation to better coordinate about \$400M/year in early education funds was also introduced. This legislation would have made six early education funding streams more effective, efficient and accountable for kindergarten-readiness results. It also would have moved in the direction of eventual reform of CCAP. Unfortunately, this coordination legislation wasn't enacted. The Office of the Legislative Auditor will report on these issues in January of 2018.</p>	<p>D- Trending Negative</p>

Public Sector To-Do List

MELF Blueprint Recommendations	2017 Progress Report	Minnesota's Grade, So Far
<p>✓ ACCELERATE EARLY ED REFORMS WITH FEDERAL HELP. Seek federal Race to the Top grant to fund an acceleration of reforms.</p>	<p>Late in 2011, Minnesota was awarded a prestigious, competitive \$45 million federal Race to the Top (RTT) grant that promised to substantially integrate MELF reforms into a coordinated early education system. The grant a) funded scholarships, b) dramatically expanded Parent Aware and aligned existing investments to Parent Aware and c) funded efforts to better track child progress and long-term outcomes.</p> <p>The outcomes from the initiative have been mixed, with lasting benefits related to Scholarships and Parent Aware, but incomplete implementation of important accountability and coordination efforts.</p>	<p>C-</p>
<p>✓ IMPROVE EARLY ED QUALITY THROUGH NEW TAX CREDITS. Enact the three tax credits MELF proposed in 2011 to reward quality improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For child care providers who volunteer for Parent Aware. • For child care workers who improve their education and stay on the job at rated programs. • For private donors supporting quality improvement efforts and/or scholarships. 	<p>None of the three MELF-recommended tax credits to incent quality improvements have been approved by the Legislature.</p> <p><i>*Extra credit: For several years the Governor and members of the Legislature have worked to strengthen Minnesota's existing parent child care tax credit. While MELF didn't recommend a parent tax credit, this could also be an effective policy tool, if it a) gives parents program flexibility, b) incentivizes parents to choose programs using best practices and c) isn't subsidizing Minnesotans who can already afford the full cost of quality programs. A parent tax credit passed in 2017. It is income-targeted and gives parents flexibility, but tax credit beneficiaries are not incentivized to choose programs using best practices.</i></p>	<p>D+</p>
<p>✓ HELP LOW INCOME KIDS ACCESS HIGH QUALITY EARLY ED. After quality improvement reforms are in place, invest in improving low-income kids' access to quality.</p>	<p>State investment in income-targeted Scholarships was increased in each the 2013, 2014 and 2015 legislative sessions with the total annual budget reaching a level of nearly \$60M/year.</p> <p>In 2016, however, \$0 of the \$50 million increase passed for early education went to income-targeted Scholarships, or any other program targeted exclusively to low-income children. Instead, 100% of the 2016 early education funding went to an untargeted UPK model.</p> <p>In 2017, \$20M/biennium in on-going investment was approved for targeted, flexible Pathway I Scholarships. Meanwhile, a one time \$50M/biennium investment – 70% of the early education increase – was earmarked for schools, and was not required to be targeted, flexible or portable.</p> <p>Despite important progress, tens of thousands of Minnesota children under age 5 – the children most likely to fall into achievement gaps – still cannot access high quality early learning programs. To “move the needle” on our shameful education achievement gaps, Minnesota must get all low-income children under age five off of waiting lists and into high quality early education as soon as possible.</p>	<p>C- Trending Positive</p> 

Private Sector To-Do List

MELF Blueprint Recommendations	2017 Progress Report	Minnesota's Grade, So Far
OVERALL GRADE		B+
<p>✓ ORGANIZE TO PUSH EARLY ED REFORMS. Form non-governmental group to promote and protect the Parent Aware Ratings.</p>	<p>Done. Parent Aware for School Readiness (PASR) was officially formed in the summer of 2012. It spent four years actively fundraising, marketing and advertising to parents and protecting the Ratings from weakening.</p> <p>Close Gaps by 5 was launched in late 2016 to focus on the full scale up of the MELF recommendations.</p>	A
<p>✓ RAISE PRIVATE MONEY TO PROMOTE AND PROTECT PARENT AWARE. Raise non-governmental money to adequately fund PASR work.</p>	<p>From 2012-2015 PASR raised \$6 million in non-governmental funding for use in accomplishing its mission.</p> <p>Close Gaps by 5 has a budget that is only one-tenth as large as MELF, and one-third as large as PASR. For 2017, Close Gaps by 5 is still working to meet its budget goal. More private sector support is needed to sustain this effort into the future.</p> <p>While planning is underway for a new "Parent Aware Research Collaborative" including public and private sector partners, no private money is currently available to support the ongoing protection of Parent Aware via evaluation.</p>	<p>B+ Trending Negative</p> 
<p>✓ BUILD AN EFFECTIVE PROMOTIONAL CAMPAIGN. Through PASR, fund parent-targeted advertising and promotions to empower parents and create market rewards for rated providers.</p>	<p>From 2012-2016 while Parent Aware rolled out statewide PASR developed a) neighborhood-level marketing kits for providers and b) a radio, TV and digital ad campaign aimed at parents. In 2015, an evaluation found that the campaign was driving parental awareness, attitude change and behavior change whenever and wherever it is running.</p> <p>This proven promotional work is not part of the Close Gaps by 5 mission and is being transitioned to other public and non-profit partners</p>	D
<p>✓ PUSH IMPROVEMENTS INFORMED BY EVALUATIONS. Through PASR, use evaluation results to recommend continuous improvement of the rating system.</p>	<p>A final evaluation report released in 2016 was used to inform improvements in the rating system.</p> <p>With PASR's sunset, this evaluation work is being transitioned to a nascent collaborative of interested partners. DHS has provided regular updates on some Parent Aware progress measures, but sustained investment in robust evaluation is necessary to meet child outcome and quality improvement goals.</p>	<p>D Trending Positive</p>
<p>✓ PROTECT RATINGS STANDARDS. Fight any efforts to weaken Rating standards.</p>	<p>While the Parent Aware Ratings have always been designed to measure kindergarten-readiness exclusively, some leaders have suggested having the Ratings measure other things. Such efforts have been successfully discouraged. In 2017, a number of relatively simple changes that are focused on kindergarten-readiness are being implemented.</p> <p>In 2017, there were no new moves to weaken Rating standards.</p>	A
<p>✓ ENCOURAGE HOME ASSESSMENTS. Through employers, encourage parents to focus at home on their child's school readiness, including use of the PASR-supported Is Your Child Ready Quiz.</p>	<p>The Is Your Child Ready Quiz is featured prominently on the heavily promoted and visited Parent Aware search site, ParentAware.org/Quiz. In 2017, the Quiz section of the website was the 7th most visited destination with nearly 5,500 page views.</p>	B
<p>✓ EXPAND BUSINESS COALITION. Expand the size and level of commitment of the business coalition supporting early education reforms.</p>	<p>Close Gaps by 5 involves the Minnesota Business Partnership, the Minnesota Chamber and individual business leaders in its efforts to educate lawmakers.</p>	B

Private Sector To-Do List

MELF Blueprint Recommendations	2017 Progress Report	Minnesota's Grade, So Far
<p>✓ LOBBY FOR FURTHER REFORMS. Speak out in favor of MELF reforms: a) reform existing government programs; and b) Enact the three tax credits MELF proposed in 2011 to reward quality improvement</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • For child care providers who volunteer for Parent Aware • For child care workers who improve their education and stay on the job at rated programs • For private donors supporting quality improvements efforts and/or scholarships. 	<p>In 2017, Close Gaps by 5 initiated and strongly supported legislation to better coordinate six existing early education funding streams. It included provisions to better track, manage and disclose funding and outcomes across funding streams and moved in the direction of eventual CCAP reform. This bill would not have been introduced without Close Gaps by 5's leadership.</p> <p>While this coordination legislation was not enacted by the Legislature, it did spark important legislative discussions that could help pave the way for future reforms. In 2017, the Legislative Auditor will be looking into several issues the legislation was intended to address. In 2018, this report should help better inform legislative debate.</p> <p>In 2017, there was no further discussion of the MELF-recommended tax credits.</p>	<p>B- Trending Positive</p> 
<p>✓ SPEAK OUT FOR LOW INCOME KIDS WHO CAN'T ACCESS HIGH QUALITY EARLY ED. After quality improvement reforms are in place, invest in improving low-income kids' access to quality.</p>	<p>In 2017, Close Gaps by 5 was extremely active speaking out in favor of targeted access to quality early education. However, the results of its advocacy were mixed.</p> <p>On the positive side, 1) Scholarships got more funding and 2) were made more flexible. On the negative side, 1) several MELF-recommended reforms were not enacted, 2) limited state funding was diverted to subsidize wealthier families who can already afford quality and 3) 35,000 low-income Minnesota children under age five remain unable to access quality programs.</p> <p>While the private sector spoke out strongly in favor of MELF-recommended reforms, it's legislative success was mediocre.</p>	<p>B- Trending Positive</p> 